

## Tipai dam controversy rages on

*Not deftly handled so far*

**W**E have every reason to feel disappointed by the way the Tipaimukh dam issue has been handled so far, and the fault lies at the door of the government as well as the opposition BNP.

It is only natural that concerns have been voiced by different quarters about the possible deleterious consequence that Bangladesh might face due to the Tipai dam especially in the backdrop of lack of substantial information about the project.

While the government has taken up on India's offer to send a parliamentary delegation to visit the site and assess the issue first hand, there are several matters that have created confusion in public mind in view of the way the matter has been addressed, not least because of the diametrically opposite approach of the government and the opposition to the issue.

The BNP has not nominated its rep for the delegation in spite of the government request to nominate two persons, but has made it conditional upon receipt of reply to Khaleida Zia's letter to Sheikh Hasina. And we cannot see why the leader of the opposition's letter to the PM on the matter, whose contents we are not aware of, has remained unanswered so far.

We feel that in matters of important national issues the opposition must be taken on board. It appears though that the opposition is taking a bit too intransigent a position. Still, the government should try and engage the opposition in such a serious matter of national concern. The government must also take into account the concerns of the civil society before formulating its stand on the issue.

That our foreign minister has very recently conveyed our concern to her Indian counterpart indicates that the government is fully aware of the ill effects of the project and the general sentiment in Bangladesh regarding the proposed dam. We hear that the Indian government has given us to understand that nothing that harms Bangladesh will be done. With such assurances from New Delhi, it is all the more expected that she would play a pro-active role in sharing all relevant information with Bangladesh.

There is little doubt that lack of detailed information regarding the project has created serious misgivings in Bangladesh. We understand that India has already floated tender for the project but we are not aware of the details of neither the tender nor whether the Bangladesh government has received adequate data from India. The dam is not a military installation and, therefore, there should be no restrictions on sharing the relevant data with Bangladesh. And the longer is the delay the deeper will the misunderstanding grow. And this is likely to be exploited by those that would want to harm Bangladesh-India relationship.

The experience in regard to Farakka with two decades intervening between its inception and the Ganges water treaty, whether we like it or not, has cast a shadow on the way we took the news of Tipaimukh dam project. On that realisation, we believe, India would do everything in its power to allay Bangladesh's concerns over Tipaimukh and move to ensure that nothing jeopardising friendly relations between the two countries will be done.

## Bad ferry services costing the economy dearly

*Authorities' laid-back attitude has led up to present systemic dysfunction*

**T**HE ferry situation on both sides of the river Padma is now in a critical state. On the Paturia-Daulatdia and Mawa-Kawrakandi routes, vehicles of all kinds as well as thousands of people remain stranded for as many as sixteen hours because a very large number of the ferries that are usually in service have of late become inoperative. Of the thirteen ferries on the Paturia-Daulatdia route, six have simply gone out of order. On the Mawa-Kawrakandi route, the ferries are so timeworn that they have nearly been rendered incapable of providing services any more.

This is certainly bad news, but worse is the fact that a remarkable degree of lethargy appears to have gone into the question of making the ferries operable again. Many of the ferries now out of order were sent to the Narayanganj dockyard over a period of the last many months but till date nothing has been done to quicken repair work on them and send them back to service. Two ferries, the Shah Jalal and Barkat, developed engine failure a few days ago as a result of which ferry services have become even more acute. Now, while a suspension of ferry services or a dislocation of them causes immense sufferings to people and results in a huge number of vehicles being stranded for hours, even for days, in a row, the bigger problem is that these vehicles, mostly trucks, happen to carry perishable goods to different parts of the country. Bad ferry services, therefore, only exacerbate the problem, to the extent that when goods are ruined traders stand to lose a huge amount of money. At the same time, there is a distinct possibility that the non-movement of vehicles because of ferry shortage or suspension will cause supply ruptures and push up the prices of commodities.

The matter should draw a swift and effective response from the BIWTC authorities. It is not enough to inform people that ferries have gone out of order. Everyone knows that. The authorities should have planned out ferry operations, repair and maintenance in order for the system not to have reached this dysfunctional state. What is now unquestionably more important is when and how fast they can be repaired and put back into service. It is especially at this time of year, when the water level in the rivers rises and the currents are generally stronger than usual, thereby slowing down ferry movement, that uninterrupted ferry services are an absolute necessity. But such unfettered movement can only be possible if meaningful measures are initiated towards repairing the unworkable ferries as well as replacing some of them with new acquisitions. If all the ten ferries on the Mawa-Kawrakandi route are over six decades old, it certainly says something about the decrepit state the entire ferry system has fallen into.

Might the authorities give some serious attention to these questions?

## The caretaker government in the dock

The caretaker government, because of lack of transparency and inefficient handling of the state affairs by some of its members, began to lose the confidence of the people. A sluggish economy, rising inflation, and sky-rocketing prices made things more difficult for them.

HUSAIN IMAM

**S**OME senior lawmakers of both treasury and opposition bench of the present parliament have demanded trial of some members of the caretaker government of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed for violation of constitution and human rights and abuse of power.

There are allegations about torture of politicians and businessmen in custody. There are allegations about involvement of government agencies in extorting money from people through blackmailing. There are allegations against at least two of its advisers for involvement in corruption and irregularities. All these allegations, in my opinion, need to be seriously looked into.

In case anyone forgot what happened in those days, let's run through the events in brief. On January 11, 2007, the president-cum-CTG chief Prof. Iajuddin Ahmed, after having failed to create a congenial atmosphere to hold a free, fair and credible election, mainly of his own fault, under apparent pressure from the armed forces, quit his position as CTG, dissolved the advisory council, canceled the national election (scheduled to be held on January 22), declared emergency, and installed a new CTG with Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed as its chief.

The new caretaker government, with a promise to bring about a qualitative change in the all too murky and anarchic politics prevailing at that time and hold a credible election free of money and muscle in the shortest possible time, launched, with the active support and participation of the armed forces, a series of programs that included among others preparation of a fresh voter list with photo and ID, reconstitution of election commission, anti corruption commission, public service commission, reform of electoral rules and a massive anti-corruption drive.

The people, reeling under high prices of

food and other essential items and a state of extreme violence resulting out of confrontational politics, welcomed the new move and breathed a sigh of relief. They were happy to see a halt to confrontational politics, a rigged election and a deteriorating law and order situation.

Another important reason for them to support the new move was that they thought the prices of essential commodities would come down and the unbridled corruption that was eating the vitals of the society would be brought down to an acceptable level.

The AL took it as a victory of their do-or-die movement that they had been waging

for more than two years to undo the blueprint hatched by BNP-Jamaat alliance to rig the national election and go to power once again with the help of a partisan president and Election Commission, both historically loyal to them. This was why AL and its alliance members jubilantly joined the oath-taking ceremony of the newly-formed caretaker government and BNP-Jamaat alliance abstained from it.

The rest of the story should be still fresh in the minds of the people as well as the politicians. In the name of anti-corruption drive, scores of people, mostly the political stalwarts of the AL and BNP and some big businessmen, were arrested and put behind bars on charges of corruption and abuse of power. Some of them were taken on remand and, it is alleged, put to both physical and mental tortures. In some cases even the wives and children were not spared from arrest or harassment.

The caretaker government, because of lack of transparency and inefficient handling of the state affairs by some of its members, began to lose the confidence of

the people. A sluggish economy, rising inflation, and sky-rocketing prices made things more difficult for them.

The caretaker government also failed to understand that the two ladies had, for historical reasons, large numbers of followers among the people and any attempt to minus them from politics would be counter-productive.

In the end, they had to bow down to the will of the people and compromise with them, not only for an acceptable solution of the problem, i.e. a credible election, but also for their safe exit.

Having said that, I must say, if end justifies the means, despite all the allegations now being raised against them, the caretaker government, including the armed forces in general, should get their due share of credit for: fore-stalling a rigged and manipulated election, giving us a correct voter list with photo and ID, and for holding the most free, fair and credible election the country has ever had since independence.

Capt. Husain Imam is a retired merchant naval officer.



The caretaker govt had to bow down to the will of the people and give them a credible election.

## Monsoon without music

You can sense the onset of depression in the mood. The Indian economy escaped the international collapse because its capital was not tied to the world of capitalism. It is more dependent on nature than bankers.



Urban India is soon going to be hit by higher prices, lower production and fewer jobs.

M.J. AKBAR

**T**HERE are two ways of checking out the state of the monsoons. You can always enquire from the meteorological department, and take their variable word at face, or faceless, value. The more pleasant option is to switch on the music channels of All India Radio; the radio jockeys of their Hindi film song programmes look out of the window. AIR has a fabulous stock of *saawan* and *barsaat* songs that it reserves for the season beginning from around the second week of June, its monsoon music.

There has been a faint edge of panic -- or is it helplessness? -- around the *umar ghumar kar aayi re ghata* and *dum dum diga diga mausam bhiga bhiga* songs this year. The clouds have not arrived with the

customary charm of sky-wide turbulence. [I fear the onomatopoeia of the lyrics is beginning to affect the phrases of the column.] Mumbai's radio jockeys can occasionally sprinkle a bit of moisture into their chatter, but those in Delhi are parched and in central India completely arid.

You can sense the onset of depression in the mood. The Indian economy escaped the international collapse because its capital was not tied to the world of capitalism. It is more dependent on nature than bankers. If the kharif crop is depleted, as now expected, the consequences will be an inflationary Diwali and bleak winter. The omens are ominous. The price of Lord Ganesha idols being prepared for the festival season is expected to rise by 30 to 40% over last year.

Pranab Mukherjee's budget was not designed with a future drought in mind. It had an economic message and a political purpose. The man who was hailed as the best Finance Minister by the World Bank during Mrs Indira Gandhi's time sent a sharp signal that his India was far larger than the stock exchange or the tie-suits who have usurped economic policy in the name of economic reform. This was important course correction. Pranab Mukherjee may not have been the principal activist in Nandigram, but he has absorbed its meaning. There is a growing feeling in rural India that the much-hyped economic reforms are a cosy arrangement between industrialists and the urban middle class from which they have been minused; their only role is to hand over their lifeline, land, as and when commanded to do so by the lords of industry and their obedient political servants. Pranab Mukherjee did not create jobs through an agrarian-industrial revolution, but he changed the internal equation of the budget. Rural India got 60% space instead of 40%. That is roughly equivalent to the demographic divide.

In ten weeks at least some of the industrialists who feel that they have not been sufficiently appeased by lollipops and cola could be thanking Mukherjee for having put some purchasing power into rural India. Nearly 70% of the telecom industry is now village-dependent. The days of cottage industry soap in small-town shops are over. National and multinational brands dominate the shelves. But we are not talking good news here; merely that without this budget the situation in rural India would have been much worse.

Urban India will be squeezed by a triple whammy: higher prices, lower production, fewer jobs, and retrenchment. Since the overwhelming majority of India's working class is still in the unorganised sector, and the Left has done absolutely nothing to move beyond its traditional trade union constituency, the voiceless will be worst hit.

A crisis is visible. Why, then, does everyone seem so sanguine in Delhi? The absence of tension is easily explained. Politicians, of all hues, turn tense only when their jobs are at stake. Other lives will be affected; theirs will go on, in enviable comfort. Delhi soaks up the tax wealth of the nation under the excuse of some extravaganza or the other. This budget was no exception in its generosity

to the home of the all-party ruling class.

If the monsoon had failed last year, the sound of alarm bells would have woken up every household from here to Washington. The next general elections are now too distant to disturb the even tenor of the recently-rewarded. The only signs of worry are on experienced foreheads -- those of Dr Manmohan Singh and Pranab Mukherjee, for instance. They have seen an India tortured by food shortfalls. The last serious droughts were when Rajiv Gandhi was Prime Minister, in 1998, more than two decades ago, and in 2002, when Atal Behari Vajpayee was Prime Minister. Nature's seven-year itch is back, but excellent disaster-management and comfortable reserves have dimmed the memory of punishing food shortages. Most MPs, particularly the younger lot, tend to lapse into a complacent confidence. The careful and the experienced understand the value of precaution.

Urban and rural are not homogenous labels. At the very least there is the hunger line divide in both categories, with poverty being more intense in rural India. More than half of rural India is still beyond the reach of Mukherjee's allotments. Governments are always reluctant to admit the truth of poverty; numbers below the poverty line have actually risen in the last five years in absolute terms. The poorest suffer the most in any weather. There is no music in their brief lives; they are outside the range of the radio of all-India.

We can continue to ignore this nether India, but are we sure that it will continue to ignore our self-satisfied approach? How many times do Naxalites have to blast our police-protected comfort zones for us to get the message? Pranab Mukherjee has seen what Nandigram did to the most entrenched political system in the country, the Marxists in Bengal, before the elections. He has watched what Lalgarh has done after the elections. He has just taken a tentative step towards telling the India of budgets that those without budgets are knocking at the gates with axe and arrow.

Another of AIR's favourite monsoon songs is the Jaya Bhaduri number *Ab ke sajan saawan mein, aag lagi jiwan mein*. This year, the fire, which once spoke of love, might have a totally new connotation.